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To: Labour

From: Stan Greenberg
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RE: THE CAMPAIGN'S RESEARCH DESIGN AND STRUCTURE
Third report on the 2005 Labour campaign

This third memo is on the design and structure of the campaign's research program and, we hope, the last one devoted to learning from our past experience.

As we stated in our last two memos, greater intensity and strategic focus could have raised Labour's share of the vote and produced a larger majority – a path foreclosed by the decision to go blind in the marginals. The problem of going blind in the marginals, with such a great risk to our majority, raises serious questions about the design of the research effort. It was constructed with some purpose or goal in mind, but not, it seems, to maximize Labour's majority in a third term.

The research program was unprofessional and lacking in methodological rigor, though it asserted a scientific certainty; it was erratic but rigid at the same time; it was biased, self-deluding and overly optimistic; it lacked both transparency and accountability.

We raise these criticisms not out of a casual reading of how this should be done properly. There is no firm with more experience directing polling for presidential campaigns in the United States and none with more experience polling for national campaigns in Europe and across the globe.

Choosing to Go Blind

This was a wide-ranging research program, including national surveys and focus groups, but in three critical areas, the campaign zeroed out its research – lacking the most elementary tools of a modern campaign. It is hard for us to comprehend New Labour seeking a third term so disarmed and so out of touch with new developments..

1. Blind in national tracking. The campaign chose to have no tracking program for the first two weeks of a 4 ½ week campaign. A few national polls is no substitute for a serious on-going tracking program – which was a central part of the 1997 and 2001 efforts. That the race closed to even on the eve of the election was



only evident because of our analysis of the public polls. The campaign had no way to monitor its first week (Brown and Blair together on the economy) or where we were making gains over the next two. Tracking was available only for the last two weeks, but we warned of the volatility and methodological problems of a daily “rolling poll” with inadequate sample. To get the most out of it, we wrote daily reports, based on a rigorous “likely voter model”: but even this Philip sought to block by denying the funds for the transfer of data. At the time, we warned that these decisions “border on malpractice.”

2. *Blind in the marginals.* We won’t belabor this point, as we underscored the problem in the previous memo. While polling in the “battleground states” was the primary polling effort in the U.S. presidential campaign, here the campaign stopped polling, except for a single urgent and erratic poll at the end. As it turned out, the pre-campaign marginals polling was accurate on the scale of the problem and where seats could have been better defended. Our post-election modeling shows that we could have achieved a 100-seat majority, even with the difficult currents. Indeed, our analysis of the individual seats shows that less than a one-point swing to Labour here could have increased the majority by 20. (See separate report.) Going blind has consequences.

3. *Blind to key target audiences.* As we will discuss below, the campaign adopted a fixed theory on how to win, focused on making gains with particular target groups. While all campaigns need such theories, successful campaigns constantly test their assumptions and look for new problem areas or targets as the campaign develops. That did not happen here. As a result of this remarkably rigid approach, the campaign chose not to conduct focus groups with older voters and pensioners – except at the end, under great pressure from us. That left the campaign blind to the currents that diminished our overall vote share.

Erratic Polling

As you recall, Penn’s national polling had Labour with landslide leads of 8 and 9 points for the entire six weeks prior to the election being called, giving the Conservatives 26 to 29 percent of the vote in all their polls. Then the rollercoaster begins:

- During the campaign itself, Penn discovers that all British pollsters, for years, have weighted past vote by some formula to offset the “shy” Tories. Thus, 27 days before the election, Penn introduces a new weighting formula and the Tories suddenly gain 6 points.
- During the campaign Penn also discovers that turnout matters. Except in one survey, he does not use the turnout ladder employed by every other pollster involved in British elections and thus does not notice the dramatic difference



between a full population and a real likely electorate. When he begins to report “definite” voters, a surprised Penn writes, “vote differences were dramatic.” But even then, Penn, skeptical, continued to report results premised on about 75 percent turnout; he said the campaign should look at the small number of “definite voters.” only for the most conservative estimate of the race. Yet even his “conservative” estimate turned out to be much more optimistic than the real election.

- Penn’s last minute marginals poll, conducted only after our warning, showed Labour getting demolished in the Rural Older Working Class seats, where we did fine, and his poll showed Labour doing well in Greater London, where we faced our biggest set backs.
- Penn shows Labour crashing then surging in the last week, ending with a sharply rising vote and lead – 7 points among his defined “likely voters” and 5 with his “definite voters.”

Transparency

The Labour Party will have difficulty evaluating Penn’s research, as the firm provided none of the information normally delivered by a professional research organization contracted by a campaign. For the first time in any campaign we have seen, Penn provided no banner books with the display of all questions and demographics. His memos on national polls and undecided voters offered no discussion of methodology or definition of terms, like “likely voters.” They often gave no estimate of turnout in order to judge the accuracy of vote estimates. He did not provide the full data set of all surveys to the campaign, the contracting party.

As a starting point, we believe that the Labour Party owns that data set, as it owns ours, and should ask for full transfer of the information.

The lack of disclosure and openness meant the research program repeatedly provided key decision makers with research findings, packaged in scientific surety, that should never have been reported with anything but the greatest qualifications. Some examples are set out below:

- *Disclosure on the Internet panel of undecided voters.* This panel survey began with 369 interviews and an uncertain and undisclosed methodology. Without any warnings on sub-set size, it reported “lapsed Labour voters,” “mums” and “dads.” As the sample size declined, the reports stopped reporting the number of interviews. Only after a testy exchange of emails did the memos once again report sample, now just 100 cases during the campaign. Nonetheless, the memos reported for 17 to 18 pages on the full percentage findings on men and women, just 50 cases each, with an undisclosed margin of error of plus or minus 14 points.



- ***Disclosure and the campaign's main targets.*** In September last year, Penn did an analysis that no doubt impacted the targeting of the campaign to the end. He compares *Lapsed Labour Women with Kids* and *Lapsed Labour Men with Kids*, with six full pages of analysis, including a Myers-Briggs personality analysis and array of proposed Labour policies. As each of these groups constitute 2 percent of the electorate, even a 2000 sample survey would have produced subsets of only 40 interviews each and an undisclosed margin of error of plus or minus 15 points each.

Predetermined and Americanized Targets

Penn reports that “soccer moms” were the key swing group in the United States in 2000 and “security moms” the key swing group in 2004 and now, with the British election, “mums with kids.” While it was true that the American media hyped these groups, there is no evidence that they were the key swings. In the last U.S. election, married women with kids at home were indeed very concerned with security, but this is one of the most Republican groups in the electorate, deeply worried about values, break down of family, and security. They were heavily Republican before the campaign began and stayed that way. They swung no election in America.

In any case, none of that is important if they were the key target for this election. The conclusion is based on the September targeting memo noted above which states, “drilling further into Lapsed Labour voters – they tend to be people with kids under 18 living at home.” That conclusion is based on a survey finding that 42 percent of Lapsed Labour voters have children at home, compared to 27 percent for all voters.

But even if that were true, that means that 58 percent of the target audience *did not* have children at home. An exclusive focus on parents with kids left out most of the people we needed to reach, with deeply serious consequences. In our research, we found that two-thirds of Lapsed Labour voters overall and three-quarters of those in the marginals (with an older population) did not have kids at home. By whatever standard, somewhere between three-fifths and three-quarters of the key targets for Labour were being missed by the campaign.

The campaign religiously focused on this mums-and-dads targeting, refusing to consider that the non-targets might drift elsewhere. During the campaign, we successfully raised Labour’s support with women with children at home and younger women. But that came at a price.

1. First, older voters and pensioners moved sharply away early in the campaign, creating a chasm for Labour to cross. We first put up a warning flag when the last marginals poll before the election showed slippage among pensioners. That became more urgent when 4 out of 5 public polls showed drops with the oldest voters in the campaign’s first week. A week out from the election, we warned that



these losses with older voters, particularly the men, were keeping us from passing the 37 percent ceiling.

2. Second, younger men (under 45), perhaps seeing our policy focus as very mums-oriented, began shifting sharply away from Labour in the final 10 days, with our vote falling below 30 percent and moving in particular to the Liberal Democrats.

The research team pressed for more events on breast cancer and childhood obesity to build up support further with the women with children. That succeeded, but they should never have been the only target. It was as if creating an American-style gender gap was something to emulate, when Democrats in the U.S. have had so much difficulty winning nationally. Here, the price for this artificial targeting was a reduced Labour vote share and a reduced parliamentary majority.

Biased Questions and Stacked Experiments

The national surveys were riddled with questions whose biased wording seems to get the reports to a preferred conclusion. Please note the following examples:

1. Two weeks before the election, Penn says “our policy approach remains stronger than the Tories,” based on respondents’ choice among two statements. The Labour statement was more than twice as long, with more rhetorical flourishes and covering a much broader range of policies with greater specificity.

Our economy is strong and we need to continue to stay on the same course of change – expand minimum wage, keep taxes stable, modernize public services with shorter NHS waits, help families raise their kids and crack down on illegal immigrants, but not have quotas.

OR

We need a clear change based on offering cutting waste from government, cutting taxes, and going after illegal immigrants.

Even with this biased construction, Labour’s margin in this two-way policy choice (without the LibDems) was only 4-points greater than Labour’s lead in the same poll in the 3-way vote contest. The Conservatives’ policies tested about 6 points better than their vote. With an unbiased test, the poll might have put up some warning flags.

2. To determine how the campaign should close, Penn read half the respondents positive statements about Labour’s progress and plans, and the other half negative statements, attacking the Conservative record and plans. Then, sensibly, all the respondents were asked to vote again. He concluded that the two approaches had a comparable impact, calling for some mixed strategy. But this was not meant to be an equal test. The positive statements took up half a page of the survey, while the negative ones a full page – in fact,



50 percent longer by word count. Thus, the potential greater power of a positive finish was concealed by the bias of the experiment. That too might have had consequences, as Labour's vote slipped at the end of the campaign.

These biased experiments on such key strategic decisions should be a source of great concern for the campaign. Perhaps the party will want to ask an independent group of professionals, including those with campaign experience, to review the survey instruments.

A Campaign State of Mind: Learning from the War Room

The successful and winning campaigns we've experienced are focused, disciplined, sensitive to all kinds of information, and anxious to jump on any sign of a strategy going awry or not proving effective enough. A good campaign views bad news as an opportunity. Campaigns are unique, as one can never fix these problems after Election Day. That concentrates the mind, as one looks for continuous feedback and adjustment.

The research effort brought an unusual state of mind to this campaign, in my experience, inconsistent with war-room thinking. It had a theory of the race and only sought information that allowed it to elaborate its plan or deepen support with its pre-defined target audiences. It only conducted focus groups with mums and dads, and when groups were finally held with older voters, they were so hostile the campaign decided not to do them again. Discordant information, rather than being welcomed, was attacked and ridiculed. It took weeks to even consider the problems emerging with non-target groups.

The fragmentation of the research effort likely contributed to the lack of strategic focus and clarity of direction, with important issues unresolved late into the campaign: how to make the economy drive all else, how to integrate hardworking families, how to attack the LibDems or how to appeal to them, whether to address immigration or not, identifying the five future policy offers, and finally, whether to finish negatively (on the Tory risk) or positively (on hopes for the future). Obviously, many other tensions contributed to the problem. But campaigns pay a price for multiple pollsters and multiple strategic recommendations and on-going debates at the height of the campaign.

In July of last year, we had advanced the framework for the election centered on Labour's mission of a better life for hardworking families, not just the privileged; starting with the economy but integrating public services; fairness as a passion; addressing immigration controls as part of that mission; and focusing on future policies that would personalize our mission. Later, we added the concept of accelerating the change and closing with an increasingly hopeful message of change. That contributed to the Party Conference speech and the subsequent gains. Penn brought his own perspective, also starting with the economy, addressing Iraq, and the focus on mums and dads, accompanied by a whole series of family-centered initiatives.



But in campaigns, two good ideas do not necessarily have double the power of one. They can diminish each other, particularly in the cauldron of a British campaign where clarity of direction matters.

The result was a surprisingly rigid and conservative campaign, unwilling to risk expanding on the economic narrative or taking the gamble of really offering people a hopeful vision for the future.

The structure of this campaign, we believe, contributed to Labour's reduced vote share and majority, but hopefully this note contributes to a process and determination to take back the voters and seats we lost. The last thing we want is to accept the small thinking that will come with the media's focus on the new "super-marginals." New Labour is still a very vital force in the country and should think afresh and big about the future.